DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 359 CS 206 402

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TITLE The Audience for Local Television News: Getting to Know Interests and Preferences.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 16p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (64th, East Lansing, MI, August 8-11, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Attitudes; *Information Sources; Local Issues; Media Research; News Media; Newspapers; *News Reporting; *Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Response; *Media Use

ABSTRACT

Two hundred fifty residents of a southern California city responded to a telephone survey designed to assess audience interests in and preferences for local television newscasts. The respondents were asked to rank, in order of their preference, six major news catagories: issues, unexpected events, entertainment, sports, weather, and banter between newscasters. Almost 42% of the respondents indicated that television was their major source of information about local events and issues, while only 29% preferred newspapers. More women than men used television and more men than women used newspapers as their major source for local information. In the general newscast content categories, the respondents ranked issues first, followed by unexpected events, entertainment, weather, sports, and banter. The issues category was ranked significantly higher, and banter was ranked significantly lower than the rest. Of those who expressed a preference, the majority preferred a male rather than a female newscaster. Women were less interested than men in sports, but were more interested in consumer-related stories and unexpected events, such as crimes with a female victim. (HTH)

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THE AUDIENCE FOR LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS: GETTING TO KNOW INTERESTS AND PREFERENCES

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Presented to the Radio-TV Journalism Division, AEJ, Michigan State University

August, 1981

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audience
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One of the maxims often offered to beginning journalism students and journalists by their teachers and more experienced colleagues is, "Know your audience." The rationale apparently is that if journalists "know" the demographic characteristics and interests of audience members, journalists will be able to provide the kind of information the audience wants in an interesting, understandable and entertaining fashion.

> If a news carrier is to serve its audience fully, it must know precisely to whom it is talking. Most audiences have well-defined limitations, interests and characteristics.[1]
>
> (Mitchell Charnley, REPORTING)

Fred Shook and Dan Lattimore have advised broadcast journalists to think of the audience as just one person instead of a "faceless mass," but the authors do think the "faceless mass" should be addressed.

> Another consideration is the station's target audience, a primary block of listeners or viewers with certain characteristics of age, economics or life style that give them a somewhat common identity...These audiences have different backgrounds, needs and interests and your writing can take such factors into account.[2]
>
> (THE BROADCAST NEWS PROCESS)

In addition to serving the audience better, another reason for "knowing your audience" is the increased circulation or ratings that are likely for the news carrier that best "knows" and mirrors the audience's characteristics and interests.

The reasons for knowing an audience seem clear enough, but the methods for ascertaining the needed information do not. Charnley has reported that some audience characteristics are obvious from casual observation and many others can be obtained from such standard reference works as "encyclopedias, histories and census publications;" however, some can be obtained only by "painstaking research."[3]

Reasonably precise statistical data on the demographic characteristics of an audience do seem relatively available; however, data on the interests of an audience do not. It could be to these interests that Charnley was referring when he mentioned that some would take "painstaking research" to obtain.

The purpose of this study was to conduct some "painstaking research" of the audience for local television news to ascertain and analyze the degree of interest in and preference for selected newscast elements.

The Federal Communications Commission requires television stations to survey audience members regularly to determine community needs, problems and interests. These ascertainment studies do provide some insights, but often cover broad areas of interest and relate more to public affairs than to news.

One of the major recent studies of the audience for local television news was conducted by Mark Levy in Albany, New York.[4] Levy found that about 75% of the audience members watched television news regularly. He discovered that people watched one station over another for reasons such as "the quality of the program, the program format and the newscasters(ACTIVE) and the channel was already on and habit(PASSIVE)."

Levy also found that audience members had developed five basic uses and gratifications associated with news viewing. They were "surveillance-reassurance, cognitive orientation, dissatisfactions, affective orientation and diversion." In other words, people were interested in keeping up with the events and issues of the day; in being reassured that life is not so bad, or that things could be worse; in obtaining information upon which to base and with which to support opinions; in being excited, passified or relaxed; and in being entertained.

Levy's findings shed some light on audience interests, but the findings are somewhat general. The purpose of this study was to attempt to ascertain more specific data concerning the degree of audience interest in specific types of news and information and the audience members' preference for specific elements found on local television newscasts.

audience
3-3-3

METHOD

Television newscasts in San Diego, California were observed informally for three years prior to the actual beginning of the formal research period and during that time, tentative model classification categories were developed; however, to formalize the process, during the first week of February, 1979, two newscasts from each of the three network-affiliated stations, KFMB(CBS), KGTV(ABC) and KCST(NBC), were selected at random and videotaped. The six newscasts were content analyzed by two panels of three persons each. Based on these analyses and the conclusions from the informal observation period, the following categories were developed:

Issues
Unexpected Events
Entertainment
Banter
Sports
Weather

"Issues" was operationally defined as stories which in some way helped people live better lives, make intelligent decisions and/or keep up with the important issues of the day. Examples of typical "issues" stories included a drop in local tourism and some explanations for the drop, tips on how to conserve gasoline, a pay dispute between police officers and the city government and a strike at a local aerospace plant.

"Unexpected Events" was defined as accounts of such spontaneous events as individual acts of sex, crime, violence, tragedy or property damage with no mention of issues related to the events. Examples of "unexpected events" stories included a stabbing death, a traffic accident, a drug bust, a house fire and a convenience store robbery.

"Entertainment" was defined as items which have traditionally been identified as "soft news." These included such stories as a tongue-in-cheek examination of the mating problems of two apes at the local zoo, a day in the

life of a costume designer, humorous exhibits at a science fair and a dog that liked to fly.

"Banter" was defined as discussions and joking between on-air personalities or between on-air people and reporters live in the field or in the studio.

"Sports" included specifically identified sports segments or updates. "Weather" included specifically identified weather segments or updates.

The reliability of the categories was checked by having the two separate panels place newscast elements in one randomly selected, one-hour newscast from each station into the model categories. This provided a basis for comparison of the reliability of the categorization of 160 separate items. The percentage of agreement on the placement of program elements into the six categories was just over 96%.[5]

Several subcategories were developed for five of the major categories. Under "issues," the subcategories included city council decisions and actions, board of supervisors decisions and actions, consumer-related stories, education-related stories, and stories about business and the economy.[6]

Under "unexpected events," were stories about fires, robberies or burglaries, traffic accidents, murders, assaults or rapes and SWAT operations.[7]

Under "entertainment," were restaurant reviews, movie reviews, personality profiles and humorous features.

Under "sports," were high school, local college, national college, local professional, national professional and participation sports(jogging, boating, fishing and similar activities).

Under "weather," were local conditions, national conditions, local forecasts and national forecasts.

After the categories and subcategories were developed, 400 phone numbers were selected at random by a computer from the San Diego County Telephone Directory. All of the numbers were called and respondents were asked to rank order, by degree of interest, the various categories and subcategories. Respondents were also asked how much they liked selected newscast elements, such as on-air joking and chatting among newscasters, commentaries and newscaster combinations.

audience
5-5-5

In all, 250 valid responses were obtained and used in the final analysis (112 males and 138 females).

FINDINGS

About 72% of the respondents were under 40 years old. About 83% made less than $25,000 per year. About 60% had at least some college training.

Almost 42% of the respondents reported television was their major source of information about local events and issues, 29% said newspapers, 18% said radio.[8] (SEE TABLE 1) More women than men used television and more men than women used newspapers as their major sources for local information. (X^2=8.6899, df=6, p less than .19)

TABLE 1

Major Sources of Information for Local Events and Issues in Percent by Sex

	TOTAL POPULATION	MEN	WOMEN
Television	41.6	37.5	44.9
Newspaper	29.6	32.1	27.5
Radio	18.0	17.9	18.1
Combinations	6.8	6.2	7.4
Other People	2.8	5.4	.7
Magazines	1.2	.9	1.4

Just over 69% of the audience watched television news five times a week or more. About 17% watched a mid-day newscast regularly. About 73% watched an evening newscast regularly and more than 33% watched a late-night newscast regularly. More women than men watched evening newscasts regularly, (X^2=5.952, df=1, p less than .01) but the differences between the number of men and women who watched mid-day and late-night newscasts were not significant.

audience
6-6-6

About 22% of the respondents picked 6:00 p.m. as the best time for a local television newscast. About 20% said 5:00 p.m., 14% said 11:00 p.m. and 11% picked 5:30 p.m. Evening newscasts in San Diego air at 5:00 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Late-night newscasts air at 11:00 p.m.

Almost 30% of the respondents reported they watched one television station for local news rather than another, because of the "quality" or "format" of the newscast. About 28% said it was the "newscasters," 19% could not give a reason, 12% reported "habit" and 11% said it was the "time" the newscast aired. If the reasons are grouped according to Levy's "active" and "passive" definitions, "active" reasons were given significantly more often than "passive" reasons. Women gave "newscasters" as a reason more often than men did and men reported "no reason" more often than women did. (X^2=5.803, df=4, p less than .21)

In the general newscast content categories, the respondents ranked "issues" first, followed by "unexpected events," "entertainment," "weather," "sports" and "banter." The "issues" category was ranked significantly higher than the rest and 'banter" was ranked significantly lower than the rest. "Weather" and "sports" were ranked significantly lower than "unexpected events" and "entertainment." (SEE TABLE 2) Women ranked the categories in the same order as the total sample, but men ranked sports ahead of weather.

TABLE 2

Rank Ordering of Newscast Categories and Subcategories by Sex[9]

	TOTAL POPULATION	MEN	WOMEN	P[10]
Issues	1	1	1	.20
Unexpected Events	2	2	2	.14
Entertainment	3	3	3	.13
Weather	4	5	4	.83
Sports	5	4	5	.00
Banter	6	6	6	.79

audience
7-7-7

	TOTAL POPULATION	MEN	WOMEN	P
ISSUES				
Economy	1	1	2	.05
Consumerism	2	2	1	.37
Education	3	3	3	.06
City Council	4	4	4	.31
Board of Supervisors	5	5	5	.55
UNEXPECTED EVENTS				
Robberies	1	1	1	.64
SWAT Operations	2	2	3	.61
Fires	3	3	4	.13
Murders	4	4	2	.14
Traffic Accidents	5	5	6	.69
Assaults/Rapes	6	6	5	.08
ENTERTAINMENT				
Humorous Features	1	1	1	.35
Personality Profiles	2	2	3	.29
Movie Reviews	3	3	2	.94
Restaurant Reviews	4	4	4	.79
WEATHER				
Local Conditions	1	1	1	.17
Local Forecasts	2	2	2	.53
National Conditions	3	3	3	.79
National Forecasts	4	4	4	.28
SPORTS				
Local Professional	1	1	1	.55
National Professional	2	2	2	.08
Local College	3	3	3	.46
National College	4	4	5	.11
Participation	5	5	4	.66
High School	6	6	6	.28

In the "issues" category, the respondents ranked stories about the economy first, followed by consumerism, education, the city council and the board of supervisors. Stories about the economy and consumerism were ranked significantly higher than the others. Men ranked the subcategories in the same order as the total sample, but women ranked stories about consumerism ahead of those about the economy.

In the "unexpected events" category, the respondents ranked stories about robberies first, followed by SWAT operations, fires, murders, traffic accidents and assaults. Men ranked the subcategories in the same order, but women ranked stories about murders second, followed by SWAT operations, fires, assaults and traffic accidents.

In the "entertainment" category, the respondents ranked humorous features first, followed by personality profiles, movie reviews and restaurant reviews. Restaurant reviews were ranked significantly lower than the others. Men ranked the subcategories in the same order as the total sample, but women ranked movie reviews ahead of personality profiles.

In the "weather" category, both men and women ranked information about local conditions first, followed by local forecasts, national conditions and national forecasts. Local information was ranked significantly higher than national information.

In the "sports" category, the respondents ranked stories about local professionals first, followed by national professionals, local colleges, national colleges, participation sports and high schools. Stories about professional sports were ranked higher than the rest and stories about participation sports and high schools were ranked lower than the rest. Men ranked the subcategories in the same order as the total sample, but women ranked participation sports ahead of national colleges.

Just over 45% of the respondents reported they liked it when newscasters joked and chatted among themselves. About 27% disliked "happy talk." Women liked on-air joking and chatting more than men did. (SEE TABLE 3)

TABLE 3

Audience Preferences Concerning Selected Newscast Elements in Percent by Sex

	TOTAL POPULATION	MEN	WOMEN	P
Joking/Chatting				
Like	45.2	39.3	50.0	.15
Neutral	27.2	27.7	26.8	
Dislike	27.6	33.0	23.2	
News Commentaries				
Like	55.2	61.6	50.0	.14
Neutral	30.4	27.7	32.6	
Dislike	14.4	10.7	17.4	
Sports Commentaries				
Like	46.0	51.8	41.3	.02
Neutral	32.8	34.8	31.2	
Dislike	21.2	13.4	27.5	
Sex of Main Anchor				
Male	17.6	15.2	19.6	.20
Female	8.4	11.6	5.8	
No Preference	74.0	73.2	74.6	
Number of News Anchors				
One	17.6	23.2	13.0	.10
Two	35.2	32.2	37.7	
No Preference	47.2	44.6	49.3	
Sex of Weathercaster				
Male	29.6	26.8	31.9	.48
Female	5.6	7.1	4.3	
No Preference	64.8	66.1	63.8	
Sex of Sportscaster				
Male	44.4	51.8	38.5	.05
Female	5.2	6.2	4.3	
No Preference	50.4	42.0	57.2	

Slightly more than 55% of the respondents reported they liked news commentaries. About 14% disliked them. Men liked them more than women did.

About 46% of the respondents reported they liked sports commentaries. About 21% disliked them. Men liked them more than women did.

About 75% of the respondents had no real preference for either a male or female newscaster. Of those who had a preference, almost 68% preferred a male. Women preferred male newscasters more than men did. In San Diego, all main news anchors are male. Two stations feature female co-anchors.

About 47% of the respondents had no preference for either one or two news anchors. Of those who had a preference, almost 67% preferred two. Women preferred two news anchors more than men did. In San Diego, two stations use co-anchors.

About 65% of the respondents had no preference for either a male or female weathercaster. Of those who had a preference, 84% preferred a male. Again, women preferred male weathercasters more than men did. In San Diego, all weathercasters are male, although some females have been featured on weekends.

Slightly more than 50% of the respondents had no preference for either a male or female sportscaster. Of those who had a preference, almost 90% preferred a male. More men than women had a preference and more men than women preferred a female sportscaster. In San Diego, all sportscasters are male, although one station featured a female sportscaster on the weekends for several years prior to the study.

DISCUSSION

The general findings of this study support many of Levy's findings. Television is the most important local information source for most people and most are regular, "active" television news viewers.

The main purpose of this study, though, was to examine the degree of audience interest in and preference for specific newscast elements. Accordingly, it was found that the audience was most interested in stories dealing with the economy and how to be a wiser consumer. Stories about local government actions

apparently were not as interesting. With the present state of the economy, this finding is probably not that surprising.

Another unsurprising finding was that the audience is highly interested in unexpected events. For years, unexpected event coverage has taken up large portions of local newscasts and entertainment programs featuring dramatized versions of unexpected events consistently have enjoyed high ratings.[11] The relatively high degree of interest in such events tends to confirm the so-called "fuz-wuz" philosophy of many television journalists.[12]

Entertainment-related stories were ranked almost as high as unexpected events. Apparently the audience wants to keep up with what is happening in the community, but also likes to be amused and entertained by stories about off-beat people, places and things, show business personalities and humorous happenings. The current popularity of "reality" entertainment programming such as "That's Incredible" and "Real People," supports this finding. The television news philosophies of "easing the doom and gloom" and "leaving them laughing" apparently are effective ways to build and maintain audience interest.[13]

Sports and weather were the least interesting aspects of local television newscasts next to newscaster banter. Sports and weather traditionally receive the least newscast time on local stations, so producers and news directors seem to know their audience well in this regard. It was not too surprising that local weather information and local sports stories were more interesting to audience members than national weather and sports.

While the audience members ranked "banter" lower than any of the other major newscast categories, the respondents reported they liked, or at least did not dislike, "happy talk." The audience members also reported that they liked news and sports commentaries. Levy found this to be true in his research as well.

Most of the respondents had no preference for either a male or female newscaster, weathercaster or sportscaster, but of those who did have a preference, males were preferred in every case. These findings are consistent

with those of other researchers and are not that surprising, considering that most on-air personalities in the San Diego market and in most other markets are predominantly male.[14]

The differences between men and women in their degree of interest in the various newscast categories and subcategories and their preference for selected newscast elements were not that great. Women were less interested than men in sports, but were more interested in consumer-related stories, murders, assaults and rapes.

More women than men liked "happy talk," but more men than women liked news and sports commentaries. Women had a greater preference for male on-air personalities (except for sports) and for two newscasters instead of one. Finally, more women than men indicated television was their major source of local information and women watched television news more regularly than did men.

Noting differences between male and female audience members is easy enough, but explaining the differences is a bit more difficult. Some of the differences can probably be attributed to the traditional roles that men and women have been taught to play and the things to which they have been encouraged to pay attention. For example, men were more interested in sports and the economy. These areas traditionally have been some of the things men are "supposed" to be interested in. On the other hand, women were more interested in consumer-related stories and in stories about crimes where, more often than not, women were victims.

There are at least two complicating factors in this study. One is whether the respondents truthfully reported their interests and preferences or whether they told the university-related researchers what they thought the researchers wanted to hear.

Future research might attempt to alleviate the possible "Hawthorne Effect" by devising ways to assure respondents of anonymity. Many were concerned about how their "names" were selected. Even after being told that it was only their phone numbers and not their names, many clearly were concerned about what the researchers would think of them.

Another complicating factor in the study is the likelihood that the interests and preferences of the respondents were controlled, or at least influenced, by the news the stations in San Diego presented and by how the news was presented. All of the newscast elements used in this study were selected from what "was being offered." What "should be offered" or "could be offered" was not included.

In other words, the conditioning effect of years of similar methods and philosophies of news presentation may have shaped the interests and preferences of the San Diego audience. Respondents might have expressed different interests and preferences had they been exposed to different philosophies of news and methods of news presentation.

Future research might include an open-end question concerning what audience members would like to see on local television newscasts that is not already being offered. In addition, elements from newscasts in other parts of the country might be included in the survey, even though those elements are not found on newscasts in the locale being studied.

Despite its limitations and its "case study" nature, this study does help illuminate the degree of interest a typical audience has in some typical stories covered by local television news. It also sheds some light on audience preferences for such typical newscast elements as "happy talk," "commentaries" and newscaster combinations.

Some of the findings might be generalized to a broader population, but the generalizing should be done with some caution. While it is true that San Diego audience members are likely typical of most populations, and that the newscast elements and methods of presentation on San Diego's local television stations are likely typical of most other stations, there are probably enough differences to warrant such caution.

audience
14-14-14

NOTES

[1] Mitchell Charnley, Reporting, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1966, p. 67.

[2] Frederick Shook and Dan Lattimore, The Broadcast News Process, Morton Publishing Company, Denver, 1979, p. 10.

[3] Charnley, p. 67.

[4] Mark R. Levy, "The Audience Experience With Television News," Journalism Monographs, 55:1-29(April, 1978).

[5] For a description of the method used, see William A. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," Public Opinion Quarterly, 19:321-325(Fall, 1955).

[6] The city council is the legislative body for the city of San Diego. The board of supervisors is the legislative body for the county of San Diego.

[7] Reports of judicial proceedings were not included in this study.

[8] The sampling error for the total sample of 250 is 6%. The error for males is 10% and for females it is 8%.

[9] Median values were used to determine rankings of categories and subcategories.

[10] Probability estimates determined by chi-square statistical techniques.

[11] See Joseph R. Dominick, et. al., "Television Journalism vs. Show Business: A Content Analysis of Eyewitness News," Journalism Quarterly, 52:213-218 (Summer, 1975); and Robert R. Smith, "Mythic Elements in Television News," Journal of Communication, 29:75-82(Winter, 1979).

[12] See Dan Rather and Mickey Herskowitz, The Camera Never Blinks, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1977.

[13] See Ron Powers, The Newscasters. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1978; and Ron Powers, "Eyewitless News," Columbia Journalism Review, 16:17-24 (May/June, 1977).

[14] See Susan Whittaker and Ron Whittaker, "Relative Effectiveness of Male and Female Newscasters," Journal of Broadcasting, 20:177-184(Spring, 1976); and Vernon A. Stone, "Attitudes Toward Television Newswomen," Journal of Broadcasting, 18:49-62(Winter, 1974).